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# **Indigenous Issues in Higher Education: The Choice Rests with You, Me, US**

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## **National Union of Students (NUS)**

### **Education Policy and Development Conference**

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**Creative Industries Precinct, Kelvin Grove Campus,  
Queensland University of Technology (QUT).**

## **Introduction**

I acknowledge the land of the Turrbal people and this specific area on which I am speaking today and on which we are all gathered. I am acutely aware that we are within the region known as York's Hollow, which passed through Victoria Park and down to what is now the Royal National Association Showgrounds at Bowen Hills (also called the Brisbane Ekka grounds) (Brisbane City Council (BCC)). The Kelvin Grove area was where some of the Turrbal people and other Indigenous peoples gathered to participate in ceremonial coroborees and where they later assembled to receive blankets on Queen Victoria's birthday (BCC). In 1858 it was two Turrbal men who wrote letters to the Moreton Bay Courier protesting about the treatment of their people (BCC). It is important to note that some 150 years later Aboriginal people are still writing letters to newspapers along with all levels of government, a multitude of organisations, and other groups about the treatment of Aboriginal peoples. The issues 150 years later are many, including education. This brings me to why I am here today.

Thank you for the invitation to speak to the National Union of Students Conference. The briefing I received asked me to speak to some of the key issues facing Indigenous students and Indigenous people in higher education; the new Government's commitment to "closing the gap" and "social inclusion in education" and Indigenous approaches to education; and lastly the Review of Australian Higher Education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) in relation to Indigenous Higher Education. This is a lot to cover in this time but I hopefully touch on the main areas that I see as a concern and that you can use for your submissions to the Review of Australian Higher Education. This paper is not representative in that I am not representing the views of a group of Indigenous people or an Indigenous organisation. I will ensure that NUS receives a copy of my paper in due course for posting on its website and I will additionally lodge a copy within the QUT e-prints system to enable access by you.

## **Indigenous Higher Education**

I have come to understand through time and my experience that I need to speak with frankness and openness in such environments. As young people who are leaders and / or people of influence in your respective universities, I

need to be. I do not apologise if you feel uncomfortable with the words I speak this afternoon and ask wouldn't you rather hear the lived reality of Indigenous experience than a glossed up version that everyone is trying and that things are getting better all the while Indigenous people are still struggling to exist as the sovereign peoples as much today as ever.

In looking at the issues faced by Indigenous people in universities, whether as students or as staff I ask you to reflect on your own situations. Reflect on your own subjectivity don't just look outward at Indigenous people as objects (Nicoll, 2004). This is one of the problems with governments, systems, institutions, welfare agencies and the higher education sector. I ask you, how many people do you see who reflect you, your culture, your background, your religion, your worldview within the higher education sector? If you are from the dominant culture than just about everyone around you in some Australian universities will reflect you. If you are from a minority group or are an Indigenous person then there will be very few who reflect you within the university. I will share an example from my own life. When I came to the Kelvin Grove Campus of the Brisbane College of Advanced Education (BCAE) in 1987, there were a handful of Aboriginal people. They were nearly all employed in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unit. Today when I visit the Kelvin Grove campus of Queensland University of Technology (QUT) there are more Aboriginal people than there use to be, but they are still mostly employed in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unit or in Indigenous specific areas or within lower levels of administration. This is despite some 20 plus years since I was first here and a reasonably large number of graduates from undergraduate and postgraduate programs. If you were to examine the staffing profiles at other universities in this country you would see more or less the same thing. QUT is not unique in this respect.

Indigenous students sit in classes and lecture theatres and on the end of a computer email from non-Indigenous professors, lecturers and tutors. Indigenous students ask questions of library and administration staff who are more than likely non-Indigenous people. Indigenous students sit within spaces and places of learning that are dominated by non-Indigenous students and non-Indigenous staff. Indigenous staff members if they work within an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unit may be surrounded by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people but when they venture out into the university environment at large find themselves on working parties, committees and advisory groups dominated by non-Indigenous people. They teach classes and tutorials where non-Indigenous students are the dominant culture. If they do not work in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unit, Indigenous staff may be the only Indigenous person in their school or department and sometimes they may be the only Indigenous person in the whole faculty. These days I more closely examine and explore the reasons why I am asked to be on panels, committees or working groups. I want more than to play the role that Deloria (2004) terms, a 'house pet' (p.29). I will also not be involved if I feel I am only wanted for 'window dressing' (Mihesuah, 2004, p.44), that is, the university wants me but not my opinions. I do not wish to be part of panels, committees or working groups when I am offered no value other than as 'native informant' to legitimate their academic processes. This amounts to

a recycling of the colonial power and a distinct difference in standpoints between those with institutional privilege and those without.

I know that sometimes in the past we as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been positioned by non-Indigenous people within universities in ways that have allowed universities to take, consume, and make what we had to give their own for the purposes of their work. Our knowledge has been taken and intellectualised and commercialised for people other than us through their employment and ownership within universities and through the offerings to students and publishing houses. I know that in the past universities have sought out what 'type' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people it wants on certain committees, teaching its courses or representing its interests. Bell Hooks (1994) describes in part this process of selection of some people over others, 'Black women are treated as though we are a box of chocolates presented to individual white women for their eating pleasure, so they can decide for themselves and others which pieces are most tasty' (p.80). In terms of some universities I know I have been positioned as the 'most tasty' for specific purposes. At the same time I have also been seen as unpalatable for paid academic work. My position is not unique. Numerous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been in the same position for years.

This situation is not going to change unless may be there was an option of attending an Indigenous university. The idea of an Indigenous university was first posed by intellectual warrior Uncle Erol West. Uncle Erol passed away some time ago but the work he undertook still assists us today. While an Indigenous university might assist some people and in the United States of America, Canada and New Zealand, Indigenous higher education institutions do, it is not the answer for everyone. What would help is getting more Indigenous people engaged within higher education in and at all levels and getting non-Indigenous people to work with Indigenous people to minimise the racism and the dominating and colonial regime that underpins the present higher education system. I believe that some of this additionally impacts on people from a range of other cultures who are either residents or Australia or who come here as international students, but it is particularly oppressive for Indigenous Australians as the sovereign peoples of this country recently named Australia. You as student leaders can have a place in making this system less oppressive and more engaging.

In terms of the new Government's commitment to "closing the gap" and "social inclusion in education" and the Bradley Review I will look forward to what the new Government is going to do. It is known that Indigenous people are under-represented in the higher education sector. Indigenous Australians make up only 1.25 percent of the university population yet we make up 2.4 percent of the Australian population (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008: 29; James, Bexley & Maxwell, 2008: 43). The Discussion paper for the Review of Australian Higher Education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) asserts from the Universities Australia study (James, Bexley & Maxwell, 2008) that there are two main challenges to increasing the participation of Indigenous students:

1. Preparing students academically for university (school completion rates for Indigenous people are about half of that for other Australians);
2. Then once they are enrolled (the university completion rate for Indigenous students is below 50 percent).

The discussion paper also identifies financial factors as significant in the access and retention of Indigenous students. While Universities Australia suggests that there are significant cultural issues that need to be addressed to help Indigenous students achieve better outcomes in higher education.

No where in the discussion paper did I find words that reflected that there was a need for the university system to change to a place where Indigenous people want to be and are driven in passion and desperation to be part of the higher education sector because it will be a place which will include our worldviews, where research that was about us would include us as researchers and position us as the sovereign peoples, places where our sovereignty would be recognised and embraced, where we would be treated as not being in a position of 'lack' or 'lacking', where our institutions and organisations needs would be met by graduates and more. I want you to think about from whose frame is the discussion paper written, who does it reflect, and who does it show needs to perhaps change. Even so, if the sector is going to change is it going to change to get a few gold stars and a bit of publicity about how good the Government and the sector is because it is 'trying to fix things up', or is it going to allow itself to participate in a massive overall where all views will be considered and where they are open to major structural change and renovation rather than a touch up here and there which results in a few cosmetic changes.

The cosmetic changes and touches up here and there don't do anything to change the status quo of domination and reproduction of racialised and institutionalised power and privilege that keeps us locked within the system, values and controls put in place by the colonisers. In this continue to be deprecated (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p.74). There are some non-Indigenous people in this process who will say 'at least it's better than nothing', or 'we are trying' and more but at the end of the day just because they know a lot about Indigenous issues or the position of Indigenous people in terms of equity measures and injustice and appear to be doing something does not mean that they will support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, our worldviews and our values over their own and it doesn't mean that they will not put Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people down in the process. In essence they might even protect and maintain their own interests in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues by the denial and exclusion of Indigenous people and our sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson, 2004). Moreton-Robinson writes about this from the perspective of the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty (ibid.).

The words of Monture-Angus (1995, p.69) are useful here when she explains that she,

... believed that once I could write enough letters after my name that White people would accept me as equal. I no longer proscribe to the theory of equality because it does not significantly embrace my difference or that I choose to continue to remain different...As I climbed the ladder of success I never understood that I could not climb to a safer place. I now understand that the ladder I was climbing was not my ladder and it cannot ever take me to a safe place. The ladder, the higher I climbed, led to the source of my oppression (1995, p. 69).

In regards to the review it is about putting forward recommendations for real change – to change the ladder - and the government and universities then making real change – to change the ladder.

In regards to the new Government and any discussions, I will put forward the papers developed by the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council as they are the representative body that has formulated documents on the key issues and priorities for Indigenous people in higher education. I will also put forward the policies and positions formulated by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) as they have also had an Indigenous policy-working group for some time. I am not sure what work the Council of Australian Postgraduates Inc (CAPA), the National Indigenous Postgraduate Association Corporation (NIPACC) or the NUS has undertaken in recent times and I understand that your capacity has been diminished due to the impact of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU). I ask you to look at what Indigenous people engaged within the sector have already said will work in the effort to engage Indigenous people.

I would like members of the National Union of Students to embrace the words of the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) when it explains that we need to see:

More Indigenous people are completing secondary schooling with the aim to enter higher education;

More Indigenous people completing undergraduate education;

More Indigenous people completing postgraduate education; and

More Indigenous people employed within the higher education sector.

(James and Devlin, 2006)

I would also like to see the NUS adopting the priorities outlined by the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) (See James and Devlin, 2006). They are:

1. Encourage universities to work with schools and TAFE colleagues and other registered training organizations to build pathways and raise the levels of aspiration and confidence of Indigenous students.
2. Develop a concerted strategy to improve the level of Indigenous undergraduate enrolment.

3. Improve the level of Indigenous postgraduate enrolment, enhance Indigenous research and increase the number of Indigenous researchers.

Why aren't Indigenous researchers being engaged in capacity building? Or grants around Indigenous content and other fields and disciplines? Why are the numbers of Indigenous postgraduates dropping? Why are we deemed to close to our research sometimes when white people are not deemed to close to their research based on their racialised subjectivity?

4. Improve the rates of success, retention and completion for Indigenous students.

Why are Indigenous students not completing?

5. Enhance the prominence and status of Indigenous culture, knowledge and studies on campus.

Why are universities talking about including Indigenous perspectives instead of theories, knowledge and ways of knowing? Why are some universities still allowing its Indigenous staff to not have operational budgets while the non-Indigenous equivalents do? Why do we not have an Academy of Indigenous Studies in the same way there is an Academy of Humanities, and Academy of Social Sciences and more? The idea of an Academy of Indigenous Studies is currently being working on at a national level by Jill Milroy and Maggie Walter. It will be presented at the 2008 National Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Knowledges Conference in Hobart (2-4<sup>th</sup> July 2008).

6. Increase the number of Indigenous people working in Australian universities.

Why are the number of Indigenous people working in universities dropping? What is being done about it?

7. Improve the participation of Indigenous people in university governance and management.

How many Indigenous people are on key committees? How many are in key positions? Why is our racialised subjectivity always considered when white racialised subjectivity is not?

I say to you that I am weary of 'good, white, middle-class men and women' who proclaim they want to do good for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Nicoll, 2004). They are called good people by others not me. They are considered good governments, good and virtuous who think they know what is best for us and what we as Indigenous people need to do, and should do. Remember this is what was "good white men and women" who are said to have "settled" this country, 'developed this nation', 'took the children away for their own good' and dispossessed Aboriginal people of land in order to do all

of this and it is through our dispossession and it is also through their denial of our sovereign rights that there has been and can be “good white Australian men and women”. I ask you not to be good men and women. I ask you to be bad men and women who will not perform liberal tolerance and the thinking that good is being done, as the doing good is not enough (Nicol, 2004). It does not address our sovereignty; it does not address the on-going injustice, the privileging of some over others, and more. Sometimes the allowing of good deeds allows good men and good women to gain more privileges and more benefits. I ask you to engage with Indigenous sovereignty and to engage with the thinking and ask what can I do and we do to minimize the impact of racism upon Indigenous peoples and other Australians? Ask... What can I do to decolonise the colonial regime that underpins the university I am in and the higher education system at large? Preparedness of non-Indigenous academics and students to investigate their own subjectivities, their own cultural positioning in order to fully engage with us as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is their responsibility (MacIntosh, 1998; Nicoll, 2004). Failure for them to do so will result in the on-going marginalisation, denigration and exploitation of Indigenous peoples and the denial of our sovereignty (Dei & Calliste, 2000; Dei, Karumanchery & Larumanchery-Luik, 2005; Kumashiro, 2000; Moreton-Robinson, 2007; 2006). Moreover, it will ensure the maintenance of racism, systemic marginalisation, white race privilege and racialised subjectivity.

In closing the formal part of my session, I once again say that it was in 1858, 150 years ago that two Turrbal men write to the Moreton Bay Courier protesting about the treatment of their people. Today Aboriginal people are still writing letters to newspapers, all levels of government, a multitude of organisations, and other groups about the treatment of Aboriginal peoples, still maintaining our sovereignty and still trying to be heard and to say we know what is best for us. I ask you in 150 years what will the National Union of Students be saying about your work now and what will your families be saying about their ancestors. That is what will they be saying about you? The choice rests with you, me, us.

## **Response to statements from the floor**

### **1. Issues associated with unions from other sectors.**

A range of unions have assisted some changes in society and in the positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as workers, but non-Indigenous members have also protected their own interests in terms of access to representative and leadership positions - positions of power and influence. It is almost as if it is ok to help Indigenous people at one level but not on all levels. There is also the added reality that unions through factionalism and various forms of relationship have also guarded and controlled who could be and is put up for pre-selection in national and state elections. If unions were that committed to fairness, equity, EEO, merit, discrimination, the marginalized and representation, we would have seen more Indigenous people over the years nominated through the union ranks and the ALP for pre-selection and for pre-selection in safe seats as it does for its ‘favourites’ and the ‘faithful’. It is not because Indigenous Australians lack



the ability, skills or aptitude to undertake such roles or jobs. There are other issues that play out. I have an example, when I was in the running for Vice-President of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations Inc. (CAPA) in 1996, it was raised in discussion on the floor at the annual council meeting as to how could I be representational of all the constituents as an Aboriginal woman? Also what if something happened to the President or if I wanted the job of president the year after? I had to ask what gives white Australians the mandate on representation? How arrogant and racist is to think that only Anglo-Australians can represent all people in this country? It is more about the type of people the union's want; who is in what faction; who is in what type of relationship with who; and so forth. Those students engaged in these type of politics need to raise this within the circles of your union activity. See also Fredericks, B. 2005.

## **2. Decolonisation**

See Hart and Whatman (1998) and Mihesuah, D.A. and Wilson A.C. (2004) (Eds); and Nakata, M. (2004).

## **3. Whiteness**

Dei, G. and Calliste A. (Eds.) (2000); Dei, G. J. S., Karumanchery, L. L., and Larumanchery-Luik, N. (2005); Nicoll, F. (2004); and the works of Aileen Moreton-Robinson.

## **4. Sovereignty**

See the works of Karen Martin and Aileen Moreton-Robinson.

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